

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

Realizing Democracy Supplement
Problems of Power
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power. In short, the United States has a civic and political infrastructure that is not oriented towards the *building of the capacities for shared self-rule* among communities and among policymakers alike.

THREE PATHS FORWARD

This supplement outlines three dimensions of understanding and approaching the work of democracy reform.

The first set of essays explores what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of civil society. Democracy requires a civil society infrastructure that can provide an effective counterweight to the great concentrations of wealth and power that continue to exert influence on our economic, social, cultural, and political lives. This also means that we need a civil society infrastructure that can both speak to and help bring together the different lived experiences of powerlessness and inequity into a shared conversation about community, moral values, and collective action that cuts across lines of race, gender, and class. We can create new forms of inclusive, multiracial, bottom-up civic power.

But achieving this kind of civic power requires an infrastructure that surpasses flash-in-the-pan moments of mobilization, protest, and voting, and instead channels participation through durable organizations that can deepen the efficacy and power of communities. We need advocacy strategies that can build durable grassroots power that outlasts any one election or campaign. This aspiration, in turn, raises important questions both for the practice of organizing and the civic engagement sphere—including how we resource and support grassroots groups.

Second, we examine what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of government. For example, the reliance of state legislators on external lobbyists for policy research has helped enable the outsize influence of business interests, while the limitations of our voting system and gerrymandered districts and the role of money politics reduce the accountability and responsiveness of elected officials to “we the people.”

At the same time, a reliance on technocratic top-down policymaking—even in the presence of “good governance” reforms that enhance transparency and governmental efficiency—can leave those communities most affected by public policy without real voice or accountability. In contrast, we explore how policymaking can deepen democracy and build power by, for example, expanding the scope for participatory and inclusive governance. These ideas point

to a democracy reform agenda that affects both constitutional structures and day-to-day bureaucracies of governance—and a shift in how policymakers themselves approach their work.

Third, we delve into what structural democracy reform requires in the domain of the economy. Historically, economic power has been understood as a threat to democracy. A democracy cannot survive when individual firms or actors have so much wealth and economic power that they can effectively control the fates of whole communities. Liberal democracy has always rested on the assumption that markets and governments work in mutually reinforcing ways. But just as economic freedom and political freedom go together, so too do economic oppression and political oppression go together. A democracy marked by deep inequities of wealth—operating simultaneously along class, race, and gender lines—is one in which political democracy is fundamentally limited and unstable, as economic exclusion and concentrated power easily spill over into political exclusion. As we imagine a deeply inclusive and power-balanced political democracy, we must also imagine a similarly radically transformed inclusive economy that balances power, opportunity, and wealth.

This means pushing beyond more conventional forms of economic reform to envision more structural ones. For example, we need to do more than just investing in financial literacy or job training as ways to better equip workers and consumers for surviving in today’s economy. We need to also look at how background rules of corporate governance, antitrust regulation, financial regulation, and the like have created an incentive structure that encourages extractive vulture capitalism that concentrates wealth rather than driving innovation and equity.

By bringing together theoretical insights and on-the-ground case studies, this supplement offers a conceptual framework for realizing an inclusive multiracial democracy. Following this path will require more innovation, creativity, and bold reform agendas, which in turn will generate further case studies and opportunities for learning. This expansive approach to realizing democracy is not a partisan affair. Indeed, the policies that have helped perpetuate inequality have often been advanced by Democrats and Republicans alike. And the kinds of structural reforms that these essays propose cut across familiar lines of party or constituency. We do not pretend to have a blueprint for realizing our democratic aspirations, but we hope that in setting a direction and a framework, we can point toward a path forward. ●

Problems of Power

Fixing democracy demands the building and aligning of people’s motivation and authority to act.

BY HAHRIE HAN

Power operates in every domain of human life: in families and communities; in social, civic, and economic organizations; and in political states and regimes. Reclaiming democracy means contending with power.

Yet reformers are often reluctant to confront problems of power. Revealing underlying power dynamics can be complex and uncomfortable. It is often tempting to try to solve problems by instead looking for policy fixes, new technologies, and informational solutions.

In fact, some problems can be solved through policy, technology, and information. For instance, when doctors wanted to reduce the rate of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) in the early 1990s, they launched a campaign to teach parents to put babies to sleep on their backs instead of on their stomachs. Once parents had the knowledge that babies who sleep on their backs are less likely to suffocate, they made the necessary change and the SIDS rates dramatically declined. When scientists used technology to create the polio vaccine, they were able to basically eradicate polio. In these examples, there is an alignment, broadly speaking, between the motivation to act and the authority to act. Because parents have both the motivation to protect their children and the authority to determine how they sleep, when they had the information they needed, they adjusted their behaviors.

Problems of power, however, are different because there is usually a misalignment between motivation and authority. Either those who have the motivation to make change lack the authority or capacity to act, or those who have the authority lack the motivation. Solving problems of power, then, requires bringing motivation and authority into alignment.

Recasting challenges of democracy as problems of power makes visible a distinct set of solutions. Considered in this frame, the embrace

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of antidemocratic authoritarian ideologies around the world is not just a rejection of particular candidates, parties, or policies. Instead, it is a reflection of the profound mismatch between the motivations or interests of the public and the actions of those with authority to act. If people are left feeling powerless, they might believe they have no choice but to blow up the system.

But giving up on democracy is not the only solution. Reformers can also seek to strengthen the capacity of people to exercise their voices in the democratic process—and instantiate the authority they have to hold economic and political leaders accountable within institutions. Realizing democracy must be about building the motivation, capacity, and authority that people of all kinds need to act as a source of countervailing power to institutions of the economy and the state. That is realizing the promise of democracy.

But this is only possible if reformers understand the link between the way people behave toward each other in their daily lives and how those daily experiences shapes people's willingness and ability to act within a democracy. Every day, at home, at work, in places of worship, and in community spaces, people have positive and negative experiences with power, the state, corporations, and the democratic process. From those experiences, people develop their own beliefs about how power should be developed and deployed, as well as how to construct their own definition of democracy. In the process, they develop the motivational, practical, and material capacities that inform their ability to act in public life.

However, reformers often seek structural change at the level of institutional or policy change without seeking to change the way people experience power in their everyday lives. As such, there is nowhere to build the capacity that people need to hold institutions and policies accountable. Research on the idea of "policy drift" shows that even when unique political coalitions are formed to pass policy, the policy often drifts from its original intent in implementation, shifting to reflect the underlying power dynamics in a policy domain or community. Reformers can pass campaign finance laws to get money out of politics and voter registration laws that make it easier to participate, but unless they also address underlying questions about the disproportionate influence of the wealthy and the lack of motivation and capacity among many to vote, the underlying problem remains unsolved.

Solving problems of power in today's democracy thus entails two crucial pieces. First, reformers must invest in the institutions of civil society,

the economy, and the state through which people develop the capacities of democratic life. People are not born with the capacity they need to engage in public life; it must be cultivated. People need places to go to learn the value of engaging with others, develop the skills they need to negotiate difference, and cultivate the emotional resilience necessary to take the interpersonal risks associated with collective action. In other words, people need places to learn how to exercise their own agency. People must also have the autonomy and material conditions necessary to exercise their right to choose to act. Many people experience democracy as nothing more than the opportunity to vote for uninspiring candidates, and they see the workplace as nothing more than a site of labor extraction. When these same people reach out to community organizations, often they are treated as nothing more than names on a list. Instead, the places where people work, interact, and socialize should be places where they can build the motivations and skills they need for public life. People must experience agency in their private lives before they can become a source of countervailing power in public life.

Second, reformers must strengthen organizations through which people can exercise their power to act as a countervailing force to corporations and the state. Civil society organizations are not just where people go to learn the skills and practices of democracy; they are also sites of transformation where people's actions turn into power and influence over sociopolitical outcomes. These organizations do not transform people's participation into power by acting merely as canvassing organizations or neutral repositories for people's actions. Instead, they have to strengthen and expand ties between people, build social bridges in places where they do not otherwise exist, generate people's willingness to commit to each other, and expand people's inclination to think differently about the things they might want or the futures they might imagine. Doing all of these things means that these organizations need the leadership, structure, and governance processes that are grounded in constituency to make them powerful.

The challenge of democracy in the 21st century comes from a society that has neglected the challenge of enabling people's power. Even in civil society, catchy slogans, nifty apps, and policy debates have replaced the hard work of building capacity for democratic life and strengthening organizations that translate that capacity into the ability to hold power accountable. The precarity of this historical moment, then, comes not only

from the enormity of the problems we face, but also from the mismatch between the scale of the challenge and the hope offered by the solutions on the table. TED Talks and social media alike promise solutions that fit in a 7-minute video or 280-character missive. Authoritarian campaigns promise presidential candidates and parties as saviors. But none of those will work. Instead, the most intractable social problems are problems that require power-oriented solutions. The question is whether we will do the hard work of investing in the institutions, processes, and practices of civil society, the economy, and governance to make it real. ●

Reclaiming Civil Society

Organizers have a significant role in renewing democracy through the creation of an inclusive constituency.

BY MARSHALL GANZ & ART REYES III

The promise of American democracy is at greater risk than at any time since the 1930s. Among the most important factors of America's democracy crisis is an acute erosion in the power of civil society to assert its influence on both government and private wealth.

Since the dawn of the republic, civil society has served as the principal source of the collective capacity to engage effectively in democratic politics. Creating this capacity required what Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, described as "knowledge of how to combine": leadership practices people learn to transform individual self-interests into common interests, build bonds of solidarity, and acquire skills of democratic self-governance, including deliberation, decision making, accountability, strategizing, and taking action.

Within the context of a democratic state, civil society is a vital source of autonomous power dependent neither on government nor on private wealth—but it is capable of influencing both. This requires turning individual resources into collective power, often through the mechanism

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